

# Subjective Proximity to Crime or Social Representations? Explaining Sentencing Attitudes in Switzerland

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**Abstract** Lay sentencing attitudes are considered in the light of two theoretical perspectives. The first perspective views sentencing attitudes as parts of broader sets of social representations anchored in one's position in the social structure. The second perspective explains sentencing attitudes by their subjective experiences of crime. This paper tests both theories by performing a series of multiple regressions on two dimensions of sentencing: punishment goals and severity of punishment. Empirical data comes from a quantitative survey conducted in Switzerland. Findings reveal that indicators of subjective proximity to crime largely account for sentencing attitudes. Nevertheless, social representations of crime measured by causes of crime also have a significant impact on sentencing attitudes. Implications of these findings for sentencing in Western democracies are discussed.

**Keywords** Sentencing attitudes · Punishment goals · Severity · Subjective proximity to crime · Social representations

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## Introduction

Polls on sentencing in Western countries show that public opinion varies considerably in attitudes toward punishment goals and punitiveness. Some sections of the public call for harsher punishments, including the introduction or extension of the death penalty (Kury & Ferdinand, 1999) while others advocate alternative sanctions to imprisonment such as restitution and community service (Hough & Roberts, 1999; Roberts & Stalans, 2000). Debates about punitiveness and punishment goals raged in the last two decades in various Western countries, showing a lack of consensus on those issues.

Fostered by a growing public interest in crime and sentencing, social science research has developed in two main directions. One body of research focuses on understanding individual reactions to crime as a function of the gravity of the offense, the characteristics of the offender and characteristics of the victim (Vidmar & Miller, 1980; Jasso, 1998; Gromet & Darley, 2006). Second, a long tradition of research focuses on conceptions of justice underlying the punishment of offenders. In this respect, the goals that people attribute to punishment refer to various functions of justice such as deterrence, retribution, rehabilitation, or incapacitation (Von Hirsch, 1976; Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000; Roberts & Stalans, 2000; Sanders & Roberts, 2000; Robinson, 2006; Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006).

Overall, both of these research traditions shed light on how sentencing attitudes vary according to the context of crime and on people's cognitive motives. However, they generally fail to link sentencing attitudes to the social context of individuals, and particularly to explain contemporary changes in the public's sentencing attitudes toward crime and violence. To address these issues empirically, this paper focuses on two theoretical approaches of punitiveness that have received less attention. The first approach considers sentencing attitudes as parts of broader sets of social representations. According to this perspective, sentencing attitudes are embedded in political–moral cognitions, which lead to distinct ways of dealing with crimes. A second approach posits that sentencing attitudes are determined by subjective proximity to crime. It states that individuals with a high level of proximity to crime are more likely to develop harsher punitiveness. Despite their relevance for the understanding of sentencing attitudes, empirical tests of these perspectives remain scarce. Using a large and representative sample of individuals residing in Switzerland, this research tests the impact of social representations and proximity to crime on sentencing attitudes.

## Sentencing Attitudes as Social Representations

The first explanation relates sentencing attitudes to social representations. The social representation paradigm, developed by French social psychologists since the 1960s (Moscovici, 1961; Doise, 1984; Deschamps & Beauvois, 1996; Jodelet, 1997), hypothesizes that attitudes and cognitions about social objects are structured in shared, general, and coherent systems that make social interactions and individual actions possible without direct experience of each social object by the subject. A

social representation is defined as the construction of a social object by a community for the purpose of communication and action (Moscovici, 1961). Social representations make sense of the environment and strengthen social cohesion within specific social strata or in society at large (Elejabarrieta, 1996). Scholars involved in the study of social representations insist upon their collective nature and their embeddedness in the social structures.

As a matter of fact, sentencing attitudes may be conceptualized as social representations. Empirical evidence shows that public views regarding levels of punitiveness and punishment goals are related to other individuals' attitudes or moral reasoning. Scholars have paid particular attention to the social parameters in which attitudes toward capital punishment are embedded. According to Ellsworth & Ross (1983) support for the death penalty in the USA is rooted in a set of basic political–social values and attitudes. Regarding the Dutch, Hessing, de Keijser, & Elffers (2003) show that capital punishment support may be understood, in a broad sense, as reflecting a person's evaluation of a complex of criminal–justice-related issues. Some authors suggest that authoritarian attitudes, as general mindsets, condition perceptions, and opinions toward various social issues, including support for the capital punishment (Lester, 1998; Tyler & Weber, 1982).

Attribution theory also supports the conceptualization of sentencing attitudes as social representations. According to Heider (1958), lay perceptions of causes of criminal offences play an important role in sentencing attitudes. On one hand, some individuals tend to emphasize personal factors when attempting to account for crimes. Harsher punitive attitudes are linked with such attributions (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985). On the other hand, others emphasize environmental or structural forces, considered as independent from personal will. Those who hold more situational attributions are likely to be less punitive (Cullen et al., 1985). Moreover, public support for restorative rather than punitive justice options is more strongly correlated with the attribution of external factors than internal factors as causes of crime (Graham, Weiner, & Zucker, 1997; Lurigio, Carroll, & Stalans, 1994; McGillis, 1978). In other words, whether the individual or the social environment is perceived to be responsible for wrongdoing appears to play a key role in understanding sentencing attitudes. More generally attributions imply a specific definition of the link between individuals and society.

Following the theory of social representations (Deschamps & Beauvois, 1996), we expect attributions regarding the causes of crime to be anchored in the social structures. This hypothesis has received some support in previous research. For example, people describing themselves as conservative are more likely to support the death penalty than those declaring themselves as liberals (Sims & Johnston, 2004). Individuals supporting the Republican party are less likely to support rehabilitation as the most important goal of imprisonment than those supporting the Democrats. Ethnicity may also matter. Whites and blacks do not share the same causal attribution of responsibility for criminal acts (Young, 1991). As Hewstone & Jaspers (1984) explained, the position that individuals hold in the social structure has an influence on lay attributions of causal relations and responsibility regarding crime. Research also shows that gender might be an important factor in some contexts. Consistent findings show that women are more supportive of a

rehabilitation policy toward the offender than men (Sims & Johnston, 2004). Men's favored purpose for prison is the protection of society, whereas more women believe that rehabilitation should be the main goal of imprisonment (Applegate, Cullen, & Fisher, 2002). Moreover, men are more likely to favor capital punishment and to support more punitive sanctioning than women (Applegate et al., 2002; Kury & Ferdinand, 1999; Mears, 2001; Sims & Johnston, 2004). Applegate and colleagues speak of a "potentially important gap between men's and women's attitudes toward crime, punishment, and corrections" (Applegate et al., 2002, p. 98). Gilligan (1982) proposed a theory of differential moral reasoning between men and women in order to account for their contrasting attitudes toward crime policies, justice, and sentencing. According to her, men's decisions about what is right or wrong are based on an "ethic of justice", while women's moral reasoning is based on a compassionate orientation toward others, forming an "ethic of care".

### Sentencing Attitudes and Subjective Proximity to Crime

Overall, the theory of social representations insists upon the embeddedness of sentencing attitudes in a larger set of beliefs, perceptions, and values about the causes of crime, which do not necessarily relate to an individual experience of victimization, either factual or subjective. Contrary to this theory, a second body of works stresses the proximity to crime issue as a fundamental experiential dimension accounting for sentencing attitudes. Proximity to crime has both objective and subjective components (Miller, Rossi, & Simpson, 1986). While objective proximity to crime refers to the actual likelihood of being victimized, subjective proximity to crime refers to the perceived likelihood of the occurrence of crime, especially the perceived likelihood of being the victim of crime. Miller et al. (1986) suggest that different social groups may hold different views on punishment because of their different proximity to crime and to criminal justice practices.

Various empirical findings show that fear of crime is a significant factor positively correlated with greater support for death penalty and greater punitiveness (McCorkle, 1993). According to Stack (2000), personal victimization and fear of crime are significant predictors of support for capital punishment. As Zeisel & Gallup, (1989) have put it, fear and dissatisfaction may be supportive factors for harsh punishment. In the same way, according to Hessing et al. (2003, p. 620), support for capital punishment may be seen as an instrumental response to personal concerns for crime and the anxiety it creates. It can be argued that correlations between punishment goals stressing a competitive view of justice (Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006) and subjective proximity to crime indicates that sentencing attitudes are often embedded in the fear for oneself.

More generally, the proximity to crime perspective is an extension of several recent works suggesting that perceived risk has become a focal issue of contemporary social systems (Beck, 1992; Douglas, 1994; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Giddens, 1991a, b). As Robert (2000) has pointed out, criminality is often perceived as a mass risk that must be put under control. Since security concerns have spread so much that they are no longer limited to specific categories of the

population (Robert & Pottier, 2004), fear of crime and feelings of insecurity might indeed be a key theme for understanding how people view society and institutions. In other words, according to this perspective, sentencing attitudes are encompassed in experiential factors such as victimization and fear of crime. We may note, however, that in some surveys variables related to proximity to crime are not significant predictors of sentencing attitudes (Keil & Vito, 1991; Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986; McCorkle, 1993; Sims & Johnston, 2004; Tyler & Weber, 1982).

Proximity to crime is not independent from social structures. Several studies report that women experience higher levels of fear of crime than men (Toseland, 1982; Miller et al., 1986; Ferraro, 1995; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2006). With respect to age, older persons are likely to express lower levels of subjective personal safety (Sims & Johnston, 2004; Baba & Austin, 1989). Some empirical research also reports a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and level of perceived safety (Austin, Woolever, & Baba, 1994) as well as support for capital punishment (Young, 1991). Finally, ethnicity is associated with sentencing attitudes. Because of their stronger fear of violence, whites are significantly more supportive of the death penalty than blacks (Bohm, 1991). However, Payne, Gainey, Triplett, & Danner (2004) stress the weak and inconsistent correlations found in empirical research punishment attitudes and respondents' demographic characteristics, especially gender and age.

## Hypotheses

In this research, two explanatory perspectives that may account for the embeddedness of sentencing attitudes in social structures are considered. The first one considers sentencing attitudes as being part of a broader complex of social representations. The second one posits that sentencing attitudes are mainly determined by subjective proximity to crime. As personal risk with regard to crime victimization and insecurity has become a widespread issue in contemporary societies (Lagrange, 2003), we hypothesize that subjective proximity to crime has a stronger influence than social representations on the way people think why and how offenders should be punished. This hypothesis is grounded within the recent evolution of the context of Western nations. As a matter of fact, whereas death penalty and punitivity are subject to much debate in the USA, sentencing has also emerged as a controversial issue in Europe over the past two decades (Baker, 2004; Guilleme, 2003; Kerner, 1987). Since the 1980s, there has been a rise in perceptions of insecurity and an increase in the preoccupation with crime and risk of personal victimization (Roché, 1993). Although in comparison with other countries, citizens of Switzerland show a low level of perceived insecurity (Obst, Ribeaud, & Killias, 2001), punitivity (van Dijk, Mayhew, & Killias, 1990; van Dijk & Mayhew, 1993), and criminality (see FSO, 2006), this country has not been spared from such debates (Kuhn, 1993, 2005). Violence has become a large source of concern for the Swiss population (Kellerhals, Languin, & Pattaroni, 2000). For these reasons, we hypothesize that subjective proximity to crime has become salient to such an extent that this issue has a greater influence in the understanding of sentencing attitudes than social representations about crime.

## Method

The data are drawn from the study “*L’art de punir. Les représentations sociales d’une “juste” peine*” [The Art of Punishment. Social Representations of a Fair Penalty], a large and representative survey of people living in the French part of Switzerland, conducted in 2000 (Languin, Kellerhals, & Robert, 2006). Using lists provided by population offices from the various areas included in the survey, the sample was drawn randomly from adults aged between 18 and 75 years old. A postal questionnaire was sent to a sample of 4,500 people. The final response rate after two recalls was 44%, which yielded a total of 1,881 respondents on a basis of 4,192 valid questionnaires. This response rate is similar to the percentage reported by Kury & Ferdinand (1999) in Germany, and higher than in other surveys done on similar objects in Switzerland (Oswald, Hupfeld, Klug, & Gabriel, 2002) and elsewhere (Sims & Johnston, 2004; Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006).

Overall, the structural features of the sample are quite similar to the Swiss population as reported by the Census (see FSO, 2001). Most of the respondents were married (57%) and single (25%), with 13% of separated or divorced, and with 5% of widows for the rest. Ten percent were under 26-years-old, 21% between 26- and 35-years-old, 23% between 36- and 45-years-old, 21% between 46- and 55-years-old, 16% between 56- and 65-years-old, and finally 9% were over 65-years-old. Education level was distributed into six categories: compulsory education (11%), secondary school (8%), apprenticeship (41%), matura school (10%), higher vocational education (14%), and university degree (17%). One quarter of the respondents earned less than 4,000 Swiss francs (gross income per month), 59% earned between 4,001 and 10,000, and 15% more than 10,000. Respondents of Swiss nationality were the majority (84%).

## Punishment Goal Scales

To assess punishment goals, a series of 15 items were used, representing a variety of objectives of sentencing. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each goal attributed to punishment by choosing between three possibilities: “should not be a goal” (coded as 0), “subordinate goal” (coded as 1), and “main goal” (coded as 2). Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of responses on each item.

To examine the extent to which this set of 15 punishment goals may be reduced into a more limited number, we ran a principal component analysis (Escofier & Pagès, 1988; Kim & Müller, 1978) and performed a varimax rotation with the pairwise option for the treatment of missing values. Four factors were extracted with an eigen value higher than 1, explaining 50.8% of total variance (Table 2). Items included in the first factor (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .65$ ) relate to attitudes oriented by the objective to set the perpetrator apart from society. The sanctions refer mainly to the offender by using means that are outside the spectrum of effective and official goals pursued by the Swiss legal system. Sentencing is characterized by the objective to inflict suffering and to put the offender to shame. This dimension includes a component of retribution in terms of “vengeful desert” (Robinson, 2006), mixed

**Table 1** Punishment goals items, mean, standard deviation, and *N*

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>N</i>
To avenge the victim	.16	.46	1837
To make the offender suffer in order that he/she expiates	.19	.50	1844
To put the offender to shame	.27	.56	1846
To banish the offender from the society	.36	.64	1843
To dissuade the population from breaking the law	1.31	.80	1842
To teach discipline to offenders	1.34	.75	1844
To make atonement for the trouble caused to society	1.38	.70	1835
To make the offender pay	1.46	.69	1839
To keep the offender from harming the society	1.53	.71	1851
To cure the offender	1.53	.69	1845
To remind everyone that social rules have to be respected	1.61	.63	1858
To repair the damage caused to the victim	1.66	.58	1850
To make the offender think in order that he/she improves	1.76	.52	1852
To prepare the offender's return into society	1.78	.52	1852
To prevent the offender from doing it again	1.81	.51	1854

with a component of incapacitation. We called this first factor “exclusion” because the primary focus of punishment aims to exclude offenders from the community.

The second factor (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ) is centred on prevention toward potential and actual offenders. This “deterrence” goal aims at maintaining the social order by acting on the perpetrator on the one hand (specific deterrence), and by recalling the social norms to the population on the other hand (general deterrence). Here, deterrence serves also to re-establish social consensus about rules and values that everyone has to respect (Durkheim, 1964).

The third factor “reintegration” (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .56$ ) measures the importance attributed to the social rehabilitation of offenders. Punishment is essentially oriented toward the reintegration of the criminal into society. The criminal has to become conscious of the harm he/she did in order to be able to respect the rules and share the values of the community again. The item “to prevent the offender from doing it again” is thus understood within this rehabilitative view that seeks to reintegrate the offender into society rather than within a strictly utilitarian view that seeks to protect society from offenders.

Finally, the fourth factor “restitution” (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67^1$ ) focuses on the rights of victims and those of society. The idea of reparation is central in this punishment goal and refers to the just desert perspective (Von Hirsch, 1976).

In summary, the four dimensions obtained by the factorial analysis are consistent with the findings of other empirical research on the various functions of punishment (Sanders & Roberts, 2000; Oswald et al., 2002). They provide a detailed picture of the broad justifications of punishment—deterrence and just desert—that are

<sup>1</sup> Note that the relatively low scores of Cronbach's alphas are due to the limited number of indicators included in each scale (between three and four indicators).

**Table 2** Factor analysis of punishment goals items, standardized scoring coefficients

Items	Factor 1 “Exclusion”	Factor 2 “Deterrence”	Factor 3 “Reintegration”	Factor 4 “Restitution”	Communality
Eigenvalues:	3.06	2.15	1.25	1.17	
Cumulated proportion of variance explained (%):	20.38	34.71	43.03	50.82	
To make the offender suffer in order that he/she expiates	<b>0.75</b>	0.01	−0.10	0.06	0.582
To put the offender to shame	<b>0.71</b>	0.05	0.09	0.13	0.537
To avenge the victim	<b>0.63</b>	0.04	−0.10	−0.01	0.412
To banish the offender from the society	<b>0.59</b>	0.08	−0.08	0.05	0.358
To remind everyone that social rules have to be respected	0.03	<b>0.80</b>	0.03	0.12	0.652
To dissuade the population from breaking the law	−0.02	<b>0.79</b>	0.06	0.05	0.628
To keep the offender from harming the society	0.22	<b>0.60</b>	0.10	0.12	0.459
To teach discipline to offenders	0.32	<b>0.40</b>	0.36	0.14	0.416
To cure the offender	−0.02	−0.04	<b>0.71</b>	0.11	0.516
To make the offender think in order that he/she improves	0.02	0.13	<b>0.69</b>	−0.02	0.500
To prepare the offender’s return into society	−0.24	0.06	<b>0.62</b>	0.00	0.449
To prevent the offender from doing it again	−0.06	0.39	<b>0.42</b>	0.03	0.326
To repair the damage caused to the victim	0.00	0.02	0.06	<b>0.86</b>	0.745
To make atonement for the trouble caused to society	0.06	0.19	0.10	<b>0.80</b>	0.690
To make the offender pay	0.30	0.22	−0.07	<b>0.46</b>	0.354

Bold values indicate on which factor each item is substantially loaded

traditionally distinguished as people’s motivations for punishment (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). “Exclusion” refers to an extreme utilitarian version of punishment, focussing on the incapacitation of the offender within a vengeful reasoning, while on the opposite, “reintegration” aims at preparing the offender’s reintegration into society. “Deterrence” is above all concerned with preventing of future harm against society by reminding social norms. “Restitution” refers to the objective of reparation of the harm the offender caused to the victim and to the society. Note that self-reported sentencing attitudes cannot be presumed to be good



predictors of behaviors (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). This discrepancy between stated and actual justification applies particularly when people support deterrence-oriented statements while practically supporting retributive statements (Carlsmith, 2008).

### *Severity Scale*

Following Sprott's (1999) methodological statements that case-specific questions are better than one general question, the degree of severity of punishment was measured by asking respondents what would be the fairest way to punish a series of five serious crimes from their own point of view (Table 3).

Close-ended response categories of sanction were listed as follows: “none” (coded as 0), “community service, fine” (coded as 1), “suspended sentence” (coded as 2), “one month up to three years in prison” (coded as 3), “four up to ten years in prison” (coded as 4), “eleven up to twenty years in prison” (coded as 5), “life imprisonment” (coded as 6), and “death penalty” (coded as 7). The severity scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ) was obtained by summing scores of the five items, where higher scores reflect more punitive attitudes. Whereas there was no significant association between severity and reintegration as goal of punishment, the severity scale was moderately correlated with exclusion ( $r = .17^{**}$ ), restitution ( $r = .12^{**}$ ), and deterrence ( $r = .10^{**}$ ). On the whole, these findings tend to be consistent with those reporting that punitive attitudes are weakly related to punishment goals (Roberts & Gebotys, 1989). The results confirm that punishments goals and degree of severity of punishment must be analytically separated insofar as a punitive attitude is not necessarily contradictory to support for rehabilitation as a punishment goal for example (McCorkle, 1993; Sundt, Cullen, Applegate, & Turner, 1998).

### *Predictors*

The first set of predictors refers to the subjective proximity to crime (Miller et al., 1986). Three constructs were used to assess the individual experience of criminality. First, *feeling of personal insecurity* in the public sphere (see Robert & Pottier, 1997) was measured by asking respondents how often they felt insecure going outside alone in the evening (from 0 = *never or nearly never*, to 4 = *nearly always*). While 47% of respondents reported the lowest feelings of insecurity, 1 respondent out of 10 (12%) reported feeling insecure “often” or “nearly always”. Second, the *risk of*

**Table 3** Items of degree of severity, mean, standard deviation, and *N*

	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>N</i>
Fraud for an amount of 100,000 Swiss francs	2.29	1.02	1743
Faking of commercial accountancy for an amount of 100,000 Swiss francs	2.44	1.09	1795
Armed robbery in a jeweller's shop	3.55	.90	1802
Portfolio manager's money laundering	3.39	1.23	1763
Murder	5.27	1.09	1780

*victimization* was operationalized through a series of nine items referring to various crimes, ranging from minor (nocturnal uproar, pocket picking) to more serious ones (car accident caused by a drunken driver, car theft, housebreaking, fraud, assault, rape, attempted murder). A scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ) was computed by summing scores of respondents evaluating the likelihood of being personally victim of each crime (from 0 = *very unlikely*, to 3 = *very likely*). The mean score and standard deviation are 1.32 and 0.54. Finally, we constructed a measure for the respondent awareness of several aspects of social problems through *TV exposure*. This scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ) is based on the frequency to which respondents watch four different kinds of TV broadcasts (from 0 = *never or nearly never*, to 4 = *every day or nearly*): news; detective series; broadcast on social problems; and on justice and law court. The mean score and the standard deviation are 2.07 and 0.74, respectively.

Perceptions of causes of crime was used as a proxy for social representations. The *causes of crime* variable is a typology based on a series of 18 items. This list covered a large variety of potential causes for crime, including economic, moral, institutional, family, foreign, and socialization factors. Respondents were asked to state to which extent each cause played a “major role”, a “role of minor importance”, or “no role at all”. In order to build a typology, we used cluster analysis and examined a sequence of hierarchical cluster analyses based on Ward's method of clustering on the first two meaningful axes of the correspondence analysis (Lebart, Morineau, & Piron, 1995) (for more details, see Languin et al., 2006).

The first type stresses unemployment, poverty, and social inequalities as causes of crime (“*socio-economic inequalities*”, 15%). The second type emphasizes the fragility of the community, the decline of social cohesion, and the individualism's destructive side (“*social links breakdown*”, 18%). The third type underlines the loss of moral values and of normative landmarks in society, especially in the young generation (“*social amorality*”, 17%). The fourth type focuses on the inefficiency of the police and on the leniency of justice in their fight against crime and offenders (“*institutional laxity*”, 14%). The fifth type accounts for crime and deviance strictly within the individual and stresses the personal responsibility in the choice to break the law (“*individual deviance*”, 14%). Contrary to previous types, this type clearly emphasizes individual rather than social factors in explaining causes of crime. Finally, for about one respondent out of five, all the potential causes work but none of them especially prevails (“*multiple causality*”, 22%).

Because both theoretical perspectives acknowledge the importance of socio-economic variables on sentencing attitudes, we controlled for the effects of four classic indicators of social position. The last set of predictors is thus constituted by gender, age (from 1 = *under 26 years old*, to 6 = *over 65 years old*), education level (from 1 = *compulsory education*, to 6 = *university degree*), and political orientation. Political orientation was measured by asking respondents which political party they personally felt closer to. We distinguished people close to the left and right wing, and those who declared to have no political preference. Others predictors have been tested but have been dropped in order to avoid multicollinearity. As a matter of fact, multiple regression analyses are sensitive to correlations among the independent

variables included in the model. Strong correlations between two or more independent variables constitute a problem insofar as they have adverse effects on estimated coefficients in a multiple regression model. To assess multicollinearity, we used the variance inflation factor (VIF) test, which is a coefficient of determination of each independent variable with all others within a set of predictors (Mansfield & Helms, 1982; Stewart, 1987).

## Results

To disentangle the various factors related to sentencing attitudes, we performed standard regression analyses on punishment goals and severity of punishment. These statistical analyses estimate the impact of each explanatory factor controlled for all other factors.<sup>2</sup> In other words, they enable us to compare the impact of the factors associated with each of the two theoretical perspectives presented above. In a first step, we computed models of regression with the indicators of subjective proximity to crime controlled for the impact of socioeconomic variables. In a second step, we added the causes of the crime variable as a proxy for social representations.

### Punishment Goals

Four independent punishment goals were tested by a multiple regression in two steps (see Table 4). Concerning exclusion (model A), the indicators of subjective proximity to crime had a highly significant effect. Indeed, exclusion was more likely to be supported by respondents who had a high level of personal insecurity, a high risk of victimization, and who were regularly exposed to crime on TV.

The inclusion of the causes of crime variable significantly improved the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .041^{**}$ ). Respondents stressing socio-economic inequalities and the breakdown of social links as major causes of crime were less likely to endorse the goal of exclusion. Moreover, the social amorality item was marginally significant ( $p = .061$ ). Conversely, those viewing crime as mainly due to individual deviance or to institutional laxity were more likely to choose exclusion as a punishment goal. The effect of subjective proximity to crime remained on the whole unchanged, although the effect of feeling of personal insecurity became nonsignificant.

Regarding the impact of the socioeconomic variables, men were more prone than women to choose exclusion as were respondents from a right-wing than left-wing political orientation. Moreover, there was a negative relationship between level of education and exclusion. Respondents were less likely to endorse exclusion as a punishment goal the greater their education.

Subjective proximity to crime also had an important effect on deterrence (model B). Risk of victimization and TV exposure again increased the likelihood of seeing

<sup>2</sup> In order to ensure that the results were not affected by the non-normal distribution of the dependent variables, we also transformed the goals of punishment and severity of punishment into categorical variables and performed ordinal regressions on them. Results of linear regression models and results of ordinal models end up to be almost identical (tables not presented).

**Table 4** Multiple regression models predicting attitudes with respect to punishment goals (beta standardized coefficients)

	Model A Exclusion		Model B Deterrence		Model C Restitution		Model D Reintegration	
Subjective proximity to crime								
Feeling of personal insecurity	.075*	.054	.008	−.005	−.002	−.012	−.083**	−.065*
Risk of victimization	.135**	.106**	.103**	.088**	.151**	.136**	.053	.077*
TV exposure	.109**	.105**	.080**	.080**	.066*	.065*	.025	.025
Socioeconomic variables								
Gender	.100**	.084**	−.031	−.038	−.009	−.016	−.127**	−.114**
Age	.000	.007	.021	.023	.036	.039	.050	.045
Education	−.084**	−.072*	−.067*	−.062*	−.114**	−.108**	−.011	−.018
Political orientation								
Right	.061*	.037	.085**	.069*	.024	.012	.054	.077*
Left	−.019	−.010	.012	.017	−.017	−.013	.055	.045
None	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−
Causes of crime								
Socio-economic inequalities	−	−.064*	−	−.032	−	−.024	−	.062
Social links breakdown	−	−.120**	−	−.043	−	−.009	−	.128**
Social amorality	−	−.061	−	−.023	−	.019	−	.063
Individual deviance	−	.086**	−	.040	−	.083*	−	−.026
Institutional laxity	−	.094**	−	.093**	−	.069*	−	−.104**
Multiple causality	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−
R <sup>2</sup>	.073	.114	.040	.054	.057	.068	.025	.061
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.067	.105	.033	.044	.050	.058	.018	.051
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.041**		.015**		.011*		.036**
F	11.863**	11.902**	6.207**	5.318**	9.042**	6.692**	3.835**	6.018**
Df	8	13	8	13	8	13	8	13

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ 

deterrence as an important punishment goal. Even though the introduction of the causes of crime variable improved the quality of the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .015^{**}$ ), both of the effects remained statistically significant. Deterrence tended to be endorsed less as the level of education increased, and respondents with a right-wing political orientation were more likely to express deterrence as a punishment goal than those

who expressed no political orientation. The causes of crime variable again had a significant effect, although weaker than for exclusion. Those who stressed the inefficiency of the police and the leniency of justice were more likely to express deterrence.

Results for restitution (model C) were consistent with the two previous models, insofar as subjective proximity to crime significantly increased the importance of restitution as a punishment goal. Again this result was only moderately weakened when the causes of crime variable was entered in the model. In addition, as for exclusion and deterrence, restitution was supported less as with increasing level of education. Restitution was endorsed more by respondents who stressed personal responsibility (individual deviance) or institutional laxity as causes of crime. The model including the causes of crime variable improved the overall quality of the regression ( $\Delta R^2 = .011^*$ ).

Reintegration (model D) showed a significant influence of subjective proximity to crime. Respondents who expressed a high level of personal insecurity were less inclined to support reintegration as a punishment goal. Reintegration was more likely to be favored by women than by men, and by those with a right-wing political orientation than those without a political orientation. The introduction of the causes of crime variable had a significant impact on the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .036^{**}$ ).

### Severity of Punishment

The second set of regression analyses dealt with severity of punishment (Table 5). A first model measured the impact of subjective proximity to crime and socioeconomic variables. We then added a second model including the causes of crime variable.

Results confirm the hypothesis that a high level of subjective proximity to crime increases the severity of punishment: the more respondents felt personal insecurity, the harsher their severity. Men were more supportive of harsh sentences than women, and individuals with a higher level of education were less harsh than individuals with lower levels of education. Severity was influenced by causes of crime, which had a significant impact on the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .02^{**}$ ). Respondents stressing institutional laxity were more likely to endorse harsh punishment.

### Summary and Discussion

As hypothesized, subjective proximity to crime was more strongly associated with sentencing attitudes than were social representations about causes of crime. In other words, in a risk society (Beck, 1992), claims for justice mirror calls for harsh punishment and exclusion, and convey the expression of individual rights to security and self-protection. Indeed, the higher the proximity, whether measured by risks of victimization, TV exposure, or feeling of personal insecurity, the more respondents endorsed exclusion, deterrence, and restitution as punishment goals. In addition, respondents reporting a high level of personal insecurity were more likely to be harsh in severity of punishment. The will to ease personal anxiety and feelings of

**Table 5** Multiple regression models predicting attitudes with respect to severity of punishment (beta standardized coefficients)

	Severity of punishment	
Subjective proximity to crime		
Feeling of personal insecurity	.099*	.084**
Risk of victimization	.061	.042
TV exposure	.048	.047
Socioeconomic variables		
Gender	.103**	.094**
Age	−.061*	−.058
Education	−.119**	−.111**
Political orientation		
Right	−.008	−.027
Left	.003	.009
None	−	−
Causes of crime		
Socio-economic inequalities	−	−.047
Social links breakdown	−	−.053
Social amorality	−	−.034
Individual deviance	−	.058
Institutional laxity	−	.093**
Multiple causality	−	
$R^2$	.045	.064
Adjusted $R^2$	.038	.054
$\Delta R^2$		.020**
$F$	6.678**	6.019**
Df	8	13

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ 

insecurity are related to goals such as setting apart the danger, protecting society, but also to feelings of empathy toward the victim and of rejection toward the offender. Exclusion, deterrence and restitution are thus grounded on emotional feelings associated with subjective proximity to crime. Restoration of the social bond between the offender and society and prevention are “secondary” concerns for individuals who are worried about their personal safety. In this regard, one interesting finding of this research lies in the strong effect that subjective proximity to crime has on exclusion as a punishment goal. It must be remembered that sentences included in this goal (revenge, shame, suffering) are out of the range of legal penalties enforced in Switzerland as in most Western democracies. Based on the results of this research, one may predict that the relatively large number of individuals concerned with crime in their personal environment and who feel threatened about their physical integrity or their belongings are likely to be willing to adopt new punitive laws that go well beyond anything that the country set up in the past or that the political and judicial elites envision for the future.

However, the importance of subjective proximity to crime does not mean that public attitudes regarding crime and punishment are only a matter of feelings in

connection with insecurity and perceived risk of being a victim. The analyses showed that social representations also have a significant impact on sentencing attitudes. Exclusion and reintegration were influenced by social representations of causes of criminal offences, while deterrence and restitution showed weaker statistical correlations with social representations. In this respect, the results show a clear divide between those who stress external factors (in particular poor social and economic conditions, the decline of social cohesion and individualism's destructive side) and those who stress internal factors such as personal choice or individual deviations (see Lurigio et al., 1994; McGillis, 1978). Respondents who explained crime mainly as individual deviance and as institutional laxity were more likely to support exclusion, deterrence, and restitution, and were less prone to endorse reintegration as punishment goal. Conversely, those who viewed crime as resulting from socioeconomic inequalities or from fragmenting social bounds were more likely to endorse reintegration and to reject exclusion.

The notion of personal responsibility is consequently a key issue. Insofar as crime is perceived as a deliberate act of breaking the social order or as the consequence of the inefficiency of social institutions, the objective of the sentence has to act upon the offender (exclusion), to protect society (deterrence), and to help the victims cope (restitution). In contrast, when offenders are seen as shaped by economic and social inequalities or by the decline of social cohesion, they cannot be blamed. From there, the return of offenders to the community (reintegration) tends to have a priority as a punishment goal. Regarding the severity of punishment, results show a moderate effect of institutional laxity, which promotes harsher sentences.

Both subjective proximity to crime and social representations produce significant effects on punishment goal and severity of punishment. The impact of social representations is, however, on average weaker than the impact of subjective proximity to crime. This result validates the underlying assumption that individual fear of crime constitutes a key factor for the understanding of contemporary sentencing attitudes. Switzerland is marked by a low level of criminality in comparison with other European nations and with the US. However, crime policies and justice matters have been increasingly in the public debate over the last two decades in Switzerland. In addition, feelings of insecurity has been on the rise for the last two decades, in a period of social anxiety stemming from globalization, economic crises, and the issue of the integration of Switzerland within Europe (Sapin, Spini, & Widmer, 2007). In connection with such a context, the findings support the idea that public perceptions of crime and lay opinions about punishment belong to a larger complex of risks and fears associated with the latest developments of capitalist societies (Beck, 1992; Garland, 1998).

The findings of course raise some issues requiring additional theoretical work and empirical evidence. Foremost, the social representation and subjective proximity to crime explanations are not exclusive. Attitudes have a cognitive dimension and an experiential dimension that are intertwined. It is thus difficult to claim a strict separation between these dimensions, especially concerning attitudes toward crime, which have strong emotional implications. Further research regarding empirical

measurements of both constructs may help to escape this epistemological difficulty by attempting to isolate what comes under the cognitive dimension and what comes under the experiential dimension.

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